

## Freedom of the Press

Iran's media environment remained one of the most repressive in the world in 2013. Although scores of journalists were threatened, arrested, subjected to unfair trials, and imprisoned—particularly in the run-up to presidential elections in June—there was a decline in the numbers of incarcerated journalists compared with previous years. The media environment continued to be adversely affected by further closures of independent media outlets and systematic internet censorship. However, throughout the year and particularly during the presidential election period, reporters and editors were able to cover a marginally broader array of sensitive topics than in the recent past.

Constitutional provisions and laws restrict what can be covered in the press and fail to provide protections for the media. The government regularly invokes vaguely worded laws to criminalize dissenting opinions. Article 24 of the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but with a broad exception for content that is deemed “detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public.” The Press Law, first drafted in 1986 and amended in 2000, states that “publications and news media shall enjoy freedom of expression provided what they publish does not violate Islamic principles of the civil code.” Article 3 of the law states, “The press have the right to publish the opinions, constructive criticisms, suggestions and explanations of individuals and government officials for public information while duly observing the Islamic teachings and the best interest of the community.” Article 500 of the penal code states that anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state will be sentenced to between three months and a year in prison, but the code leaves “propaganda” undefined. Under Article 513, certain offenses deemed to be an “insult to religion” are punishable by death, or prison terms of one to five years for lesser offenses, with “insult” similarly undefined. In 2010, the government broadened the definition of the crime of *moharebeh*, or “enmity against God,” in order to convict activists and journalists. Iranian law also provides for sentences of up to two years in prison, up to 74 lashes, or fines for those convicted of intentionally creating “anxiety and unease in the public's mind,” spreading “false rumors,” writing about “acts that are not true,” and criticizing state officials; however, many prison sentences have been arbitrarily harsh, ranging from 6 to 10 years or more. Courts also frequently set exorbitant bail for detained journalists. In March 2013, 10 journalists arrested amid a media crackdown at the beginning of the year were released only after posting bail of about \$350,000. Fariba Pajoh, a female journalist for several reformist outlets, was arrested in July and released on bail for some \$390,000. A government decree issued in April 2012 made it mandatory for news outlets to reveal their sources for any information they publish.

The judiciary frequently denies accused journalists due process by referring their cases to the Islamic Revolutionary Court (IRC), an emergency venue intended for those suspected of seeking to overthrow the regime. Cases against journalists before the IRC have featured closed-door hearings and denial of access to an attorney or a fair jury. In January 2013, Saeed Madani, a 74-year-old journalist affiliated with several dissident outlets, was sentenced by such a court to 6 years in prison and 10 years of internal exile. In October, actress and blogger Pegah Ahangarani and documentarian Mahnaz Mohammadi were sentenced by the Tehran IRC to 18 months and 5 years in prison, respectively. Later, in November, journalist brothers Khosro and Masoud Kordpour were sentenced by an IRC to 6 and 3½ years in prison, respectively, with Khosro to serve another 2 years of internal exile in the city of Kerman, more than 1,100 kilometers (680 miles) from his home, following his prison term. The brothers, who were Kurdish, had been arrested in March for reporting on rights abuses and the treatment of prisoners, and were held for months without charge.

In 2010, Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, a member of the powerful Assembly of Experts, forbade lawyers from defending political suspects, making it difficult for members of the legal profession to assist arrested journalists. In April 2013, the blogger Kaveh Taheri faced his first hearing after being detained since September 2012, while allegedly having been tortured in custody and denied the services of a lawyer. Several prominent human rights lawyers who have defended journalists and others in political cases have themselves been prosecuted in recent years.

Iran has no laws guaranteeing citizens' access to information retained by the government or public institutions. President Hassan Rouhani—who was elected in July—published a draft of what he termed a “Citizens’ Rights Charter” in November 2013 calling for such access, but its interpretation of public information was limited, not legally binding, and was followed by no concrete action or implementation.

Press licenses are issued by the Press Supervisory Board and are rescinded in cases where the journalist or publication criticizes the government. The government has targeted journalists' associations and civil society organizations that support freedom of expression. The Association of Iranian Journalists, a professional syndicate dedicated to protecting the rights of Iranian journalists, was shut down in 2009. Despite numerous attempts by members of the association, authorities refuse to permit the association to resume its activities. Authorities also use official or loyalist media outlets to propagate false claims about activists. The semiofficial Fars News Agency often publishes fabricated confessions or resignations, while the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) continues to monitor articles produced by Fars prior to publication to ensure that they do not violate its rules or contain prohibited information. Furthermore, news agencies are prohibited from quoting content from blocked websites or suspended newspapers.

In 2013, 12 newspapers and magazines were shut down or forced to stop publishing. In March, authorities closed down *Maghreb* newspaper for publishing an open letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, protesting against arbitrary censorship in the media. *Bahar*, a reformist newspaper, was shut down in October for publishing an article that allegedly questioned the designation of the First Shiite Imam, Ali ibn Ali Talib, as the prophet Mohammad's successor. *Bahar's* managing editor, Saeed Pouraziz, was arrested and later released on bail. Asghar Gharavi, the author of the article, spent two months in solitary confinement before being released on bail. In order to remain in business, many news outlets and journalists practice self-censorship and attempt to abide by official restrictions.

In addition to the print media, blogs and news websites—particularly those in the Persian language—are subjected to state censorship. The regime imposes systematic controls on the internet and other digital technologies. According to the OpenNet Initiative, the Iranian government has become one of the most sophisticated and pervasive censors of online content in the world, and it has the technological capability to produce its own monitoring and filtering software. Connection speeds were slowed or internet service was interrupted in the run-up to the June 2013 presidential election. Despite campaign promises made by Rouhani to remove restrictions on internet and press freedoms, authorities continue to block websites and jam foreign satellite broadcasts. The government has relaxed restrictions on media coverage of topics previously deemed sensitive, including the economic impact of international sanctions and the state of U.S.-Iran relations. The blockage of social-media websites including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, and the surveillance of the activities of Iranians who manage to reach such platforms, however, still persists. In 2013 the Intelligence Unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targeted and detained a number of internet activists and social-network users. A few detainees are said to have been tortured to extract televised confessions.

The 2013 presidential election made the Iranian media environment particularly fraught for journalists. The year began with a harsh crackdown and dozens of arrests, which analysts suspect was intended to intimidate reporters from collaborating with foreign media in the run-up to the election. Closer to the vote, government agencies began to shut down websites and publications associated with disfavored

candidates. Nevertheless, journalists attempted to cover a broader range of issues connected to the election and candidates, despite these impediments.

Foreign media are unable to operate freely in Iran. They have been accused by the authorities of fomenting the unrest that followed the disputed 2009 presidential election, and they are often punished for airing criticism of the government. The government requires all foreign correspondents to provide detailed itineraries and proposed stories before visas are granted, and visas are regularly denied to foreign reporters who have previously been critical of the regime. Furthermore, foreign media are forbidden from shooting film or photography within Iran.

As of December 2013, Iran had the second-largest number of incarcerated journalists in the world, after Turkey, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. While the number of imprisoned journalists declined from 45 in 2012 to 35 at the end of 2013, the census does not account for the dozens of journalists arrested and released throughout the year. Prison sentences are often lengthy and accompanied by professional bans, and authorities often extend the intimidation and harassment to journalists' family members. In May 2013, a revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced seven journalists working for the news website *Majzooban-e-Noor* to a total of 56 years in prison on charges ranging from "acting against national security" to "propaganda against the regime." The website provides news coverage of the minority Gonabadi Dervish religious group. Ali Ghazali, editor of the news website *Baztab Emrooz*, was arrested and later released on bail for publishing a report on the disputed June 2009 elections. However, since the election of Rouhani, several prisoners of conscience have been released. Mahsa Amrabadi, a journalist detained in 2009 and serving a two-year prison sentence since May 2012, was released in September 2013. Isa Saharkhiz, the editor of several reformist newspapers who was arrested following the disputed 2009 presidential election, was released in October 2013.

Prison conditions for journalists and bloggers still detained remain harsh. In April 2013, Mehdi Khalazli, the son of a senior Iranian cleric imprisoned for criticizing the regime on his blog, initiated a hunger strike in protest of abuses he suffered while in custody. In July, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Zahra Kazemi, an Iranian-Canadian journalist murdered while in state custody, activist groups noted the continuation of a general climate of impunity for the abuse or murder of imprisoned journalists.

Given the limited distribution of print media outside large cities, radio and television serve as the principal sources of news for many citizens, with more than 80 percent of residents receiving their news from television. Article 175 of the constitution forbids private broadcasting. The government maintains a monopoly on all domestic broadcast media and presents only the official political and religious viewpoints. The newspapers with the widest circulation and influence adhere to a conservative editorial position or are directly operated by the government. A state-run English-language satellite station, Press TV, was launched in 2007. The IRGC largely controls the Fars News Agency. An increasing number of people own satellite dishes and access international news sources, though this is technically forbidden. Since the 2009 presidential election, the government has tightened its control over illicit satellite dishes, making a greater effort to confiscate them and fine their owners. The IRGC reportedly has a budget of \$10 million dedicated to jamming foreign satellite signals for viewers in Tehran and other cities. Iran has repeatedly jammed the Persian television service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) since it was founded in 2009. The channel is considered such a threat that a website identical in design to that of BBC Persian has been created to spread allegations against BBC employees. The fake site has a .ir domain name, which cannot be used without government permission. Reporting on BBC Persian has challenged government portrayals of both the domestic political scene and Iran's foreign relations. Iranian officials often cite the work of the channel as evidence of a foreign plot against the regime. Throughout 2013, Iran-based relatives of BBC Persian employees and of other foreign media outlets such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe were subjected to intimidation, harassment, and detention by authorities.

According to a parliamentary commission investigating Iran's privatization process, a private corporation linked to the IRGC bought 51 percent of the Telecommunications Company of Iran in October 2009 with little outside competition. The government retains direct ownership of the remaining portion. The transaction gave the IRGC control over Iran's telephone systems—the fixed-line network and the two mobile-phone carriers—as well as internet service providers.

Approximately 31 percent of the population had regular access to the internet in 2013. Although subject to a range of threats and restrictions, the internet remains an important source of diverse news coverage and analysis. In an acknowledgment of its inability to completely silence online dissent, the regime has stepped up its efforts to hack sites—including those based abroad—that it cannot disable by other means, and to foster the large-scale creation of progovernment blogs, commentary, and news content.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Not Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

90

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

30

### **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

36

### **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

24